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# 'It's no longer "that black woman"; it's "that woman": language in the dynamics of vulnerability and resilience

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the interplay between language, vulnerability and resilience. More concretely, it examines the ways in which being subject to language-related vulnerability in interactions with the public shapes the agency of politicians of migrant origin in Ireland. Using a theoretical approach that sees vulnerability and resilience as dynamically related, the article analyses data from interviews with two local politicians of migrant background who speak a variety of English other than Irish English. The study shows that they find a way, albeit not without struggle, to enact agentive strategies to position themselves in the field of politics.

El objetivo de este artículo es investigar la interacción entre lengua, vulnerabilidad y resiliencia. Más concretamente, se centra en cómo la vulnerabilidad lingüística derivada de interacciones con el público influye en la agencia de los políticos de origen inmigrante en Irlanda. Con un enfoque que considera una relación dinámica entre vulnerabilidad y resiliencia, el artículo analiza entrevistas con dos políticas locales de origen inmigrante que hablan una variedad de inglés que no es el inglés de Irlanda. El estudio muestra que los participantes encuentran la manera, aunque no exenta de dificultades, de desarrollar estrategias para posicionarse en la actividad política.

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## Introduction

This study investigates the interplay of language with vulnerability and resilience, a relationship that has not received much attention in sociolinguistics and related fields (Ganassin et al., 2024; Pritzker, 2020; Samata, 2019). By adopting an understanding of vulnerability and resilience as having a dynamic relationship (Butler, 2016), the study aims to explore the ways in which being vulnerable because of one's language shapes the agency of politicians of migrant origin in the Republic of Ireland. It seeks to answer the following questions: How do candidates navigate situations of language and identity-related vulnerability in political contexts and enact resilience strategies? What do the findings indicate about the role of individual agency in contexts of intercultural communication where different spoken Englishes are treated unequally? To do so, the study engages with discussions in sociolinguistics around intercultural relationships in transnational contexts.

In one of the first systematic examinations of the relationship between mobility and language, Blommaert (2010) adopts a social stratification perspective on issues of language-related inequality.

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In his model, individuals move across scales – or layered, power-invested social levels – filled with codes, norms and expectations. To adhere to such expectations, speakers need to draw on communicative resources that correspond with those spaces (Blommaert, 2010, p. 32). For example, in privileged contexts, individuals, including those of migrant origin, are required to show they have resources, linguistic and other, that index those high levels. Those who do not meet such expectations struggle to enter those privileged spaces and gain acceptance there. This model emphasises how linguistic differences often result in unequal outcomes.

While Blommaert has placed significant emphasis on the role of agency in his theoretical explorations of space, linguistic repertoires and social interaction, Canagarajah (2013) critiques Blommaert's framework for being too vertical and static and, thus, not sufficiently sensitive to agency. He proposes a more fluid and dynamic approach to account for the agency that migrants exercise in negotiating indexical orders to their own advantage (see also Zhu, 2019). For him, spaces are not predefined or necessarily restricted but open to reconstruction through negotiation strategies. Migrants create spaces for their language practices, voices and identities by, for example, contesting dominant language ideologies, renegotiating the status, valuation and legitimacy of their varieties of English vis-à-vis the dominant variety and, ultimately, bringing about attitudinal changes in communities and institutions. This means that migrants can 'persuade even native/local speakers who are invested in traditional norms to move to a different scale of interaction where plural norms can be negotiated in more democratic terms' (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 221).

While Canagarajah's agentic approach aligns well with the theoretical orientation of vulnerability and resilience adopted in this study (see next section), it has been critiqued for not sufficiently addressing macro-level structural constraints, power dynamics and contextual particularities. For instance, migrants are not always in a position to negotiate the validity of their language variety, because local speakers may use their own status to exercise power through language (Taibi, 2022, p. 23). In such cases, migrants may be unable to alter the relatively stable systems that shape or determine which ways of speaking are recognised as legitimate in a given field (Block, 2013, p. 142; Bourdieu, 1991), particularly in fields which are steeped in symbolism and convention, such as politics (Erdocia, 2025). The only way to be successful may be to conform to, rather than resist or challenge, hegemonic orders of indexicality. This, in turn, resonates with Blommaert's emphasis on issues of power and inequality and, more generally, his understanding of society and mobility as stratified. This discussion will be revisited in the final section, drawing on the study's findings.

## The dynamics of vulnerability and resilience in political participation

In scholarly work and institutional discourse, vulnerability typically refers to a state of physical or psychological susceptibility to injury or the feeling of being at risk or wounded, often linked with themes of violence and structural relations of subjugation (Petherbridge, 2016). In this depiction of vulnerability as a fear or threat, it is construed as exclusively negative and potentially stigmatising. Individuals and groups associated with characteristics that could potentially lead to them being perceived as vulnerable are frequently labelled as passive and deemed to require external protection from institutional bodies. Such responsive actions, in turn, have often resulted in claims of governmentality and paternalism towards the targeted social groups (Butler et al., 2016).

Against this background, feminist theorists (Butler, 2016) have developed a critical understanding of vulnerability as interdependence and intersubjectivity among human beings. Vulnerability in this sense emerges as part of social relations (Butler et al., 2016). It can be defined as a constitutive openness toward others, a condition that designates underlying forms of interconnection and recognition (Petherbridge, 2016). In this theoretical orientation, vulnerability is characterised by ambivalence, that is, it designates neither positive nor negative states of being or relationality. It follows that vulnerability does not merely indicate a form of injury or susceptibility to harm or violence. In other words, it is not necessarily a limiting condition but one with the potential to make possible other conditions (Gilson, 2011). In short, vulnerability is not the opposite of agency and

can be enabling. Following this agentic understanding of vulnerability, individuals are acted upon by others and also act upon others; their receptivity is inextricably linked with their responsiveness. Vulnerability is reciprocally connected with the capacity for resilience (see below). This conceptualisation avoids essentialist associations of groups such as women or ethnic groups with vulnerability, therefore preventing the characterisation of certain groups as inherently vulnerable, which would otherwise fix them in a political position of helplessness, powerlessness and lack of agency.

In line with this scholarly work, my account draws on the relationship between recognition and vulnerability (Honneth, 1995; Petherbridge, 2016). In this view, self-realisation and full social and political membership depend on recognition from others. Active efforts to obtain recognition from other people and communities exposes us to vulnerability, that is, unpredictability, uncertainty and potential misrecognition (Petherbridge, 2016; Samata, 2019). The risk of being misrecognised can never be eradicated, as recognition by others is beyond one's control. Vulnerability, then, does not always imply subjugation nor is it embedded within structures of domination or violence, but rather it is associated with our dependence on others. People are vulnerable to instances of disregard, disrespect or degradation that might undermine their self-esteem and well-being, prevent their social and political flourishing and result in the collapse of their identity (Honneth, 1995). The focus is on someone being exposed to unfair treatment that affects their integrity, in the form of either hostile or casual, often denigratory and injurious, behaviours based on their perceived group affiliation.

Vulnerability refers to the excesses that can lead to detrimental effects on self-esteem and to forms of social suffering, not to simple exposure to others, which is inherent to all social life and is shared by everyone. Moreover, being in a position where one is potentially exposed to the adverse reactions of others is not a harm in itself. In the particular realm of politics, this is the case when politicians receive legitimate criticism or are rejected based on, for example, ideological grounds. Teixeira (2022) established two types of vulnerability: constitutive and contingent vulnerability. While the former type is structurally shared by everyone, the latter is distributed in a structurally uneven manner, impacting some individuals more than others, often establishing a hierarchy between social groups. Contingent vulnerability occurs, for instance, when politicians are unfairly treated based on identity traits such as skin colour, ethnicity, language variety or accent.

In the context of migrants' language practices, Samata (2019) terms those who are contingently vulnerable on the basis of their language the 'linguistic precariat'. As we know, communicative interactions are strongly influenced by language ideologies (Kroskrity, 2000). Applied to the specific context of this paper, this type of vulnerability affects many migrant candidates who, unlike many native-born candidates, are vulnerable in instances where part of the electorate does not recognise them as legitimate or authentic candidates and rejects their full political membership in society (Erdocia, 2023). Consequently, candidates of migrant origin may need to employ additional strategies and, more broadly, activate resilience to withstand and cope with the challenge of misrecognition by parts of the community. Resilience constitutes the second key concept in my theoretical framework.

Some critical feminist theorists (e.g. Butler et al., 2016) develop their conceptualisation of vulnerability by drawing on collective agency and interdependent forms of resistance in politics. In their work, *resilience* is exclusively characterised as 'neoliberal resilience', a concept that they firmly criticise. This opposition to *resilience* builds on criticism of the liberal conception of an autonomous and individualistic subject as being the norm for politics (see Petherbridge, 2016). These critical scholars argue against models of political intervention based on the idea of 'sovereign mastery' because they are implicated in capitalist notions such as individualism, self-interest, duress and masculine-oriented denials or suppression of vulnerability (Butler et al., 2016, p. 3). Admittedly, the concept of resilience in the literature is not without ideological connotations and is sometimes regarded as part of the cultural and ideological project of neoliberalism (Bracke, 2016). For example, the resilient individual has been characterised in theoretical work about vulnerability by the ideal of a self-sufficient, individualistic agent who aims to become impenetrable to external threats (Teixeira, 2022).

However, resilience holds various and sometimes inconsistent meanings (Bracke, 2016). Resilience is generally regarded as the ability of an individual to resist adverse situations and return to their original state. From a psychological perspective, resilience refers to the capacity of individuals to cope with adverse conditions and mitigate their detrimental effects. In sociology, it is used to refer to the capacity to adjust and negotiate to adapt to or respond to a challenging situation. Resilience is not confined to the individual sphere but can also include the social, cultural and political resources available to groups, such as community networks and cultural repertoires (Hall & Lamont, 2013).

In contrast with the aforementioned views critical of resilience, my understanding of this concept does not imply that political subjects have to exercise their agency only by denying or vanquishing their vulnerability (Butler, 2016, p. 24). Neither does it mean considering resilient individuals as acritical actors who contribute to the exclusion or neutralisation of actions to transform the structural conditions of precarity, inequality and injustice (see Butler et al., 2016, p. 6). My theoretical standpoint involves an interactive link between vulnerability and resilience, considering them as inherent aspects of individuals who are both affected by external factors and respond to them. I rely on resilience over resistance due to the particular context of this study, electoral politics. Unlike non-institutional and collective forms of antagonism and contestation, which are normally associated with resistance, in party politics individual subjects (with assistance from their political and social networks) play a more prominent role in responding to societal challenges. My choice is also rooted in the conviction that conventional politics at the institutional level can contribute to and is an essential component of social change. In sum, my underlying assumption is that focusing on the resilience of vulnerable people does not amount to contributing to their depoliticisation (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 85).

Drawing on scholarship from disciplines such as psychology, ecology and international relations, resilience is conceptualised and operationalised here as involving both adaptability and transformability. It involves the potential for personal and interrelational transformation (Walsh, 2003) using resources like management skills, social infrastructures and capital (Lin et al., 2017). To emphasise, resilience is not only the ability of determined individuals to absorb disturbances, bounce back or adapt to adverse circumstances. It is also a social and political action performed by agentive actors to oppose and confront the status quo.

### **The study: data, method and background**

This study draws on data from interviews with two women involved in local politics in Ireland (see the following section for the participants' background information), undertaken as part of a larger project with 13 first-generation migrants with varying degrees of involvement in politics (see Erdocia, 2023). The project received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science at Dublin City University. The two participants in this study were selected based on the thematic alignment and salience of their narratives with the study's focus on the dynamics of vulnerability and resilience. Unlike the others, these two participants shared detailed accounts of the difficulties they faced while engaging in politics and the strategies they put in place to overcome those challenges. Their testimonies and experiences resonate deeply with the focus on vulnerability and resilience in contexts of interaction. The two in-depth, semi-structured interviews followed a set of predetermined questions designed to initiate discussions, encourage respondents to share their perceptions and experiences, and guide the conversation in new directions. The questions explored their views on political integration in Irish society, their involvement in politics and any bias or discrimination they had experienced in their political activity. The interviews were conducted by the author in English during spring 2023; each lasted an hour. They were recorded and transcribed.

Examining the dataset, I engaged in an iterative process of reflection and revision, constantly moving between data and theory. I started by identifying examples where the participants'

embodied vulnerability resulting from interactions with others became salient. To unravel the dynamics of vulnerability and resilience, I manually selected units of meaning, primarily sequences of narratives that reflected the participants' perceptions of and reactions to their interactions with constituents, party members and other politicians. My initial coding was guided by my understanding of vulnerability as intrinsically linked to the capacity for resilience and by my conceptualisation of resilience as involving either adaptability or transformability. The codes captured the outcomes of interactive exchanges (e.g. denial of membership, cold reception, casual racism in language), their underlying causes (e.g. having a foreign accent, being a migrant), and the participants' responses to these interactions (e.g. trust-building, passive reaction, emotional burden). Additionally, I coded for the resources individuals used to navigate these experiences, such as personal values, management skills and increased engagement.

After establishing a set of *a priori* codes, I used a constructivist framework in my analytical approach to examine their relationships. Specifically, I employed a narrative positioning method (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) to consistently incorporate the participants' biographical trajectories, their construction of stance in interaction, their positions in broader societal and political discourses, and the identity claims that emerged in their interview narratives. In interpreting the data, I treated their accounts as both depictions and constructions of experiences, framing them in the broader contexts of narrative production. This stage of the analysis was also driven by a back-and-forth from data to theory. Two patterns and narrative positionings emerged through this analytical process. They represent a higher level of abstraction in the data and are underpinned by a core notion (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593), in my case, the relationship between vulnerability and resilience. The findings are presented thematically, following the two patterns.

Throughout the research process, I aimed for epistemic reflexivity and remained mindful of my paradigmatic assumptions and perspective as a migrant scholar in Ireland, and the potential impact of these on the analysis (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023). My analysis switches the focus away from deterministic vertical hierarchies, whether linguistic or otherwise (see Erdocia & Soler, 2024), and elevated expectations of negotiation strategies to accommodate the contingency resulting from intercultural interactions (Badwan & Simpson, 2019). To be clear, I do not deny the existence of spaces with asymmetrical power relations. However, my orientation incorporates the complex and dynamic nature of human interaction. In other words, the ways in which different speakers handle communicative situations and the infinite number of possible interactional scenarios across social domains with singular features make the outcome of interactions unpredictable and often non-generalisable to other contexts (Taibi, 2022, p. 23). This position also draws on Erdocia's (2025) findings in previous empirical research in the political context.

Lastly, some background notes are provided to contextualise the study, which is situated in local politics in Ireland. Modern large-scale immigration did not begin in this country until the 1990s. However, in the 2022 national census, non-Irish citizens accounted for 12% of the population, with 14.5% of the population speaking a language other than English or Irish at home. While political engagement among migrants has increased slightly over the last decade, it remains low, despite resident non-citizens being eligible to vote and run in local elections. Only 5% of the candidates in the 2024 local elections were naturalised or non-Irish citizens, and they make up only 2.2% of those elected (Buczowska, 2024). Infrastructural, socio-economic, motivational and cultural issues, along with discrimination and racism, contribute to the under-representation of migrants in Irish politics (see Erdocia, 2023; Okigbo, 2014; Szlovak, 2017). While Ireland has one of the most positive attitudes towards immigration of all the countries in the European Union (Laurence et al., 2024), there has been public hostility towards refugees and migrants since 2022, including episodes of intimidation and violence. The study was conducted before the outbreak of unprecedented racist riots erupted in Dublin in November 2023 (see Power, 2023), which made international headlines and left a lasting impact on the country.

## Findings

### *Withstanding instances of misrecognition*

Maria has been living in Ireland for over ten years, and has been actively involved in activism, specifically in advocating for migrant women. She decided to go into politics because it was an opportunity to raise her voice as a migrant woman and to contribute to more diverse mainstream politics. While she still considers herself more an activist than a politician, she says that people in the community stopped looking at her as an activist when she decided to run for election, implying that politics is a separate field of social action. In the 2019 local elections she stood for election with a progressive party in a city constituency, and her expectations were surpassed when she was nearly elected.

Coming from a country in southern Europe, she is a multilingual speaker with English as an additional language. This has important implications for both her self-esteem and her sociopolitical life. Example 1 illustrates how language-related issues such as articulateness and pronunciation constrained her full social inclusion and how this perception, in turn, undermined her self-confidence in political life.

#### Example 1

**Interviewer:** Would you say that language, the fact that your accent is not Irish and English is your second language and perhaps cultural differences, influences your engagement with politics?

**Interviewee:** Yes, in terms of accent and language. Since I moved to Ireland, that was one of my nightmares. I was always feeling very ... it was affecting my confidence because I couldn't express myself in the same way that Irish local people can do, right? Which is normal. When I went into politics, you want to come across as somebody intellectual, somebody that knows, somebody that is eloquent, right? And when you listen to other people, they're saying the same thing as you, but in a more beautiful way. It's difficult that it's not going to affect your confidence. Accents ... You don't realise about your accent until you speak and people say 'oh!'. And then that's a problem. It's like you can see it, you can feel it, and people aren't listening in the same way [...] I also took accent classes in Ireland.

**Interviewee:** Oh, did you?

**Interviewee:** Because that's how concerned I was about it. Because I was like, 'if I want to keep living in Ireland, I want people to take me into account in the same way I want people to listen to me'. So I felt like the only way was to do that.

Pronunciation training is often linked with elites in mainstream politics wanting to reduce their regional, foreign or ethnic accents to sound more local and appeal to a certain demographic (Bonotti & Willoughby, 2023). Here, however, the reason Maria took such training seems to be more about receiving full attention and being taken into account, rather than her attempting to authenticate her political campaign by sounding more Irish.

As becomes evident in the fragment, political (mis)recognition among individuals is a linguistically mediated phenomenon (Petherbridge, 2021). Specifically, we observe that disregard rooted in perceptions indexed by non-local language varieties had a notable impact on Maria's self-esteem. As seeking recognition is not only about asking for recognition for what one already is but about soliciting it for what one will be in a future relationship (Butler, 2004, p. 44), such constraints can hinder the political trajectory of migrant candidates. Thus it is important to consider further data to analyse the political dimension associated with this exposure to vulnerability.

Language, together with other cultural attributes, plays a big role in perceptions of foreignness and, in some cases, group otherness. Such perceptions involve categorising migrants as an alien group in politics, thereby fostering the emergence of biases. Example 2 illustrates the complexity of perceptions of foreignness, which vary based on the type of resonance they invoke in listeners. While Maria's country of origin generally elicits positive feelings among Irish people and often becomes the foundation for friendly interactions, her efforts to present

herself as a competent candidate are met by some voters with a sense of mistrust stemming from her migrant condition.

### Example 2

They were very open as soon as they heard my accent and knew I was X [nationality]. And again, I think that's because of all of their connection and nice memories with X [my country]. So for them it's like, 'oh, somebody from X [country]!' So I'm so happy [with their reaction]. And that was in my favour. But saying that, I think there were some people that weren't taking me seriously. They were like 'Ha, you are from X [country]. But when it comes to my country, when it comes to the place, for me, I don't know if you will be the right person, just because you are not Irish'. [...] There're two different things: One is to take you seriously as a professional, as a politician, and to vote for you and to believe that you can be a good candidate or you can do well. And the other thing is to say, 'she's so cute, she's so nice, she's so lovely'. And then, that's it. It's also very Irish, right? Like ... the Irish culture, it's very difficult to know what they are thinking when they close the door. Yeah. I have that perception with my engagement with Irish people sometimes. Okay, so not taking you seriously, which is a kind of discrimination, isn't it?

Here we see an example of what Hornsby and Langton (1998) term 'illocutionary disablement' or effective silencing of speakers 'who utter words but fail to perform the illocution they intend' (p. 21). It is precisely in the exposure to such silent, subtle and indirect forms of refusal of full political membership by a portion of the public that vulnerability, in the form of political dispossession, lies. Despite Maria's efforts to enhance her pronunciation for better receptiveness, her capacity to navigate the structural constraint resulting from mistrust of foreignness in politics appears to be limited.

One factor against receiving full recognition is the embodied nature of being a migrant, as Maria clearly articulates later in the interview: 'You are a migrant; you're coming [to the campaign] with your accent, you are coming with your face, you are coming with your surname ...'. However, vulnerability, understood as the embodied condition of being affected (Butler et al., 2016), should not be inherently deemed negative. For instance, physical features associated with a prototypical image of Irishness allegedly work in Maria's favour: 'My blue eyes are not something that helps people to go against me.' A second inhibiting factor pertains to the specificities of local politics, understood as proximate politics. Maria explains how for some electors, choice of candidate is influenced by their personal familiarity, positive opinions from family or community members, mutual connections, and so on. Her inability to meet these *familiarity* expectations, she argues, may have limited her prospects for electoral success.

In sum, the powerful structural constraints in the form of others' judgement of her as a not fully legitimate candidate seem to have outweighed any other responsive strategy at her disposal. Maria's resilience, understood as her capacity to adapt and respond to detrimental circumstances, remained within the adaptability phase.

We have seen how accent, along with non-typical Irish names and physical features, triggers perceptions of otherness, resulting in misrecognition and denials of full political membership. Yuna shares similar experiences, but in her case, she has suffered more aggressive behaviour from some individuals. Before narrating this, let me provide some background.

Yuna arrived in Ireland from a sub-Saharan African country in the early 2000s. She works in a sector that involves collaborating with a diverse community and with economic and policy stakeholders. Her primary motivations for entering politics were to serve the community and to promote diversity in institutions. She is a member of a centrist party and became a local councillor in the 2019 local elections. Despite English being her dominant language, she recognises that having an accent other than Irish English sometimes puts her in a vulnerable position when it comes to gaining full acceptance.

Example 3 is her response to a question about her overall lived experience in politics in Ireland. In referring to negative experiences when interacting with people, she reveals the effects of disrespectful and offensive remarks on her emotional state.

**Example 3**

My experience has been both good and sometimes not so good. One of the not so good is when constituents speak to me with disrespect, with utter disrespect and sometimes it can be very draining, it can be very upsetting. They will speak to me like that for different reasons. Most times it's because they feel that I shouldn't be there as a migrant and that I'm not Irish; and I put it down to ignorance. I don't even type them racist, because not everybody's racist. Some are just blatant ignorant people. They don't understand that Ireland is now a multicultural nation or they're not accepting other facts. That's not my problem, that's their problem. It does get upsetting sometimes when they say really hurtful things. But [...] I'm not allowed to respond in disrespect because my values say I respect everybody no matter how they speak to me.

This passage illustrates the emotional vulnerability of migrant politicians to the detrimental effects of derogatory attitudes and, sometimes, insulting language. Notably, Yuna attributes such behaviour to the moral failure of some individuals to accept diversity, making it a matter of individual ignorance rather than a systematic problem of racism (Lentin, 2020) underlying Irish society. Faced with such adverse situations and probably due to the institutionally mediated nature of these encounters, her reaction is confined to exercising internalised forms of control, not engaging with individuals with reactionary views of current Irish society. Put differently, being subjected to abusive interpellations (Butler, 1997) did not result in turning injury into responsive actions through contestatory speech.

In the examples presented so far, the responses of both participants consist of passive resilience, namely, finding ways to 'get on' with daily political life while being a migrant. However, enacting resilience is not to be understood as acquiescing to the social and political situation (Bourbeau & Ryan, 2018), as will be reflected in the next section.

### *Coping with offensive behaviours: remodelling individuals and social structures*

In contrast with the examples commented above, there were situations in which, rather than just maintaining passive resilience, the participants reacted energetically and, in some cases, even confronted the individuals involved. This section, therefore, focuses on cases where Yuna and Maria manifest a heightened transformative responsiveness to overcome situations of vulnerability.

Yuna frequently mentions her blackness, migrant origin and non-Irish accent as reasons for the discriminatory reactions she faces in politics. The following example shows how her professional skills in the communication sector help mitigate part of the impact of language-related prejudice and racialisation practices during interactions with the public, thus facilitating resilient responses in the political sphere.

**Example 4**

A lot of people who didn't know me would think first ... all they see first is a black woman and they're like, 'oh my God, how is she going to know how to represent us?' And then some, when I speak, they will pretend like they don't understand what I'm saying. And I think being a trainer and a strategist really helped me because I worked in X [professional sector] when I was in X [my country]. I'm a woman who's always had a lot of confidence. I don't let people ... of course, my confidence gets knocked down every once in a while. I'm human, but having that self-confidence ... I already know who I am. I've owned myself, I've defined myself. I wasn't about to let anybody redefine me in politics.

Having a strong sense of professional identity seems to enhance resilience in other social domains as well (Hunter & Warren, 2014). This example shows how vulnerability intersects with the personal, professional and political identities of individuals. In line with the idea of sovereign mastery or masculine denials of vulnerability (Butler et al., 2016), attributes such as self-sufficiency, impenetrability and fortitude constantly play a key role in the public performance of political actors. In this and other examples, we see that while Yuna's sense of ownership stemming from her personal and professional identities generally allows her to not be affected by offensive attitudes, such experiences are not harmless. Regardless of the image of robustness and even toughness that politicians, including

female politicians from migrant backgrounds, want to or are expected to convey in the public sphere, they are vulnerable to offensive behaviour.

Moreover, this passage can be interpreted as problematising the view of resilient subjects as apolitical subjects who must uncritically accept the constraints imposed on them and are, therefore, incapable of challenging the underlying conditions of discrimination (Bourbeau & Ryan, 2018). Indeed, Yuna's reaction does not resonate with Evans and Reid's (2013) criticism of the resilient individual for being someone who has 'accepted the imperative not to resist' (p. 85).

When it comes to Yuna's strong conviction that she will not allow other people to reconfigure her political identity, she is clear in establishing certain limits to the ways in which she could conform to norms and adapt herself to the political and linguistic environment of the host country. She has never considered attempting to speak like an Irish person because 'if I'm going to earn any respect, I better be consistent in what I'm doing; my accent is not going to change'. Sticking to this premise, Example 5 illustrates her ability to respond to disrespectful behaviour in the context of casual interactions, in this case in the form of unwelcome remarks with an underlying tone of hostility that use the pretext of a lack of understanding.

#### Example 5

If I'm talking about hospitals and doctors and people getting treatment, and I say 'nurse' [with a non-Irish pronunciation] instead of 'nurse' [with an Irish pronunciation], right? And somebody says, 'what are you saying there?' And I'm saying 'the nurse gave her an injection'. They say, 'so sorry, what was that?' And I say, 'the nurse came in' and they say, 'oh, nurse [with Irish pronunciation]', which is very disrespectful. Yeah, I'm confident enough to say to them, 'okay, so you do know that there are some things you say that I don't understand because you also have an accent for me. For you, I have an accent. What is important is the context of what we're talking about, not my accent. If I'm saying something and you don't understand it, it's okay to ask me again, but don't ask me in a condescending manner that makes me feel like I'm an idiot' [...] the perception that because I'm black, I'm probably dumb, I'm not educated, I don't speak good English ... that perception is already there.

As Blommaert (2010) puts it, 'small differences in language use locate the speaker in particular indexical and ascriptive categories' (p. 6). In this instance, we see Yuna's effort to disrupt language-related vulnerability by exercising active resilience in response to subtle forms of language bias which appear to seek to linguistically discipline speakers of English with foreign accents. Confronting people with dominant language ideologies and placing the responsibility for communicating also on the side of the listener can be interpreted as an altering sociolinguistic endeavour, shifting the notion of vulnerability from the condition of being affected by pernicious linguistic behaviour to the capacity to act upon those manifesting it (Butler et al., 2016). In other words, rather than the predominantly static and inward process of rebound adjustments resulting from adapting to external disturbances, we see how resilience can also comprise a dynamic process of remodelling interlocutors' cognitive frameworks and transforming structures (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003).

As Example 5 shows, political bias is often motivated by perceptions of foreignness in the context of interactions about ordinary community life, which are elicited by language. Such unbalanced sociopolitical arrangements that may limit the opportunities available to migrant candidates in the political race are also constituted by the intersection of language with other identity markers such as skin colour or 'foreign-looking' names. Candidates employ different strategies depending on the particularities of each situation to actively overcome the challenges associated with being a migrant and circumvent any potentially negative effects (in electoral terms). Maria, for example, opted to invite 'trolls' who harassed her on social media during the campaign to meet in person to discuss their unfair claims that she would not make a good representative because she is a migrant. She succeeded on two occasions, with the 'trolls' in question ending up as strong supporters. She shares how one of these encounters unfolded: 'I ended up crying with him. I was like, "it's so unfair that people are doing that". And he's like, "I'm so sorry".'

One probably more ordinary resilience strategy, in this case used in response to racial stereotypes about political competence, is captured in Example 6. It depicts a sequential progression of connected interactions and events over time. Here, Yuna's compensatory strategy aimed at counteracting some constituents' mistrust and hesitancy towards her candidacy due to her being a migrant resulted in a form of both re-authorisation and racial de-categorisation of her as a candidate.

#### Example 6

Another part that was really hard for me at the beginning was people undermining me because I'm a migrant, thinking that they can't bring their issues to me, that I may not be able to make a representation on their behalf. I felt that I had to do the work like every other person and do extra to be able to prove to them that I can do even more than others will do. And I worked my way through that, built confidence. I would constantly put out meetings with residents of different estates and say 'listen, if you have issues here, I can help you work through them'. And I think that really worked. They began to trust me when I did the first work for an estate. People began to trust me and say 'oh, if you want somebody who gets things done, it's X [participant's name]' [...] So quickly they accept me like 'that woman'. It's no longer 'that black woman'; it's 'that woman'.

The vulnerability-to-resilience sequence encompasses a conceptual shift from a structure-based perspective of domination to one centred on interactive dynamics. The narratives of Maria and Yuna show that migrant candidates may initially face judgements from the electorate that they are political 'others'. This raises the question of whether similar evaluations occur within the institutionalised and highly competitive structures of political parties. Participant experiences differ; Maria did not feel discriminated against by her party for her migrant background, and attributed clashes with other party members to ideological differences, whereas Yuna felt psychological discomfort for being stereotypically categorised. Her experience is captured in Example 7.

#### Example 7

My personal feeling is that it was really about ticking the boxes to say for the parties that were brave enough to put migrants forward, it was about them saying, 'oh, yes, we are being diverse!' But I give them credit for even doing that. Because if they didn't, the likes of myself'd not be sitting here today ... [...] there were some individuals within the party at branch level who made me feel at some state that I was a token through their actions, through things they did. They made me feel like I was a token. At first, I was upset at them, and then I got to realise through engagement that it's not really about the party, it was about the people themselves who perhaps felt threatened. They started to do things that made me feel like I was just an add-on to gather migrant votes. And rather than let that upset me ... yes, I did get a bit upset, but rather than let that bump me down, I decided to use that to my advantage. And I said, 'you know what? I'll show you that you dare not add anybody on as a token ever again'.

Relationships within the organisational framework of parties are inevitably embedded in complex dynamics derived from hierarchical structures of power but also partisan allegiances and the interdependency and strategic interests of individual members and those of the organisation. Efforts by the party to include candidates from underrepresented groups, characterised by Yuna as tokenism or perfunctory, generated exclusionary reactions on an in-group/out-group basis from some members who saw the reconfiguration of candidacies as threatening the status quo. Yuna's response was not to contest the dynamics of power emerging from relations of domination within the party. Instead, her resilience was enacted outwards and focused on intensifying the outreach of her campaign in the community, which turned out to be electorally successful.

### Discussion and concluding remarks

People's political existence is tied to the approval and recognition granted to them by others (Honneth, 1995). Considering the experiences of Yuna and Maria, we observe that some migrant politicians face considerable challenges, whether silent and subtle or direct, as they attempt to participate in electoral politics under the same conditions as Irish-born candidates. The findings suggest that these challenges are partly because of their disadvantaged social identities. Migrants

may enjoy full group membership in societal domains such as professional activities, community engagement and activism, but politics appears to be a restrictive sphere. The experiences of the participants reveal that some constituents and political agents still adhere to an exclusionary view of political life and democratic institutions, treating with wariness those considered outsiders based on inferred group affiliation. In other words, despite their successful participation in various aspects of society, migrants may encounter notable constraints when it comes to engaging in the symbolic field of political life. This is due to the rejection of their political capital and denial of their full political membership by some community members (see Erdocia, 2023).

Vulnerability cannot be fully understood outside the ‘field of power and, specifically, the differential operation of norms of recognition’ (Butler, 2004, p. 44). This study shows that migrant candidates’ vulnerability is constituted by distinct standards of recognition and, more concretely, by failures of recognition stemming from unequal social and linguistic arrangements. Furthermore, the findings reveal stratified power relations, including the ‘power to misrecognise’ candidates wielded by constituents and other actors in political parties. The differential treatment by some constituents based on linguistic and other identity factors entails an uneven distribution of vulnerability across different groups of political contenders (e.g. Irish and non-Irish candidates).

Where individuals and groups are unequally vulnerable, they lack equal conditions for meaningful political participation. This imbalance poses profound hazards to the health of democratic life. In fact, the intentionally exclusionary attitudes of some electors can be interpreted as an attempt to establish control of democratic institutions by excluding originally non-Irish candidates and, ultimately, asserting dominance over them through racist and xenophobic means. It is in the dynamic interplay between power, recognition and vulnerability (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 592) that the systemic constraints faced by migrant candidates are manifested.

But vulnerability is not only a constitutive condition but also a form of action (Butler, 2016). Vulnerability and resilience are intricately connected within politically contextualised experiences: the participants’ continued exposure to potential harm from patterns of misrecognition tends to generate in them a reaction that is manifested epistemically and politically (Teixeira, 2022). The unbalanced power relations based on a structure of privileged and unprivileged English varieties (and associated social indexicalities) make Maria and Yuna susceptible to vulnerability. Their understanding of the ideological system in the political sphere and their commitment to change it underpin the enactment of individual resilience strategies and, more broadly, the political agency to overcome their experienced vulnerability. As seen in the examples above, enabling reactions include either adapting to adverse circumstances or attempting to transform unequal and unjust linguistic and social structures. More specifically, the participants’ choices oscillate between, on the one hand, reluctantly accepting the adverse conditions of political life and adapting to them, and on the other, following a transformative impulse. However, this impulse is inevitably constrained by the narrow confines and strict formalities of mainstream politics, preventing participants from using collective antagonistic and confrontational modes to change the political status quo (Butler, 2016). It is also limited by rigid ideological constructions of language and national identity (I return to this point below).

Resilience does not operate on an all-or-nothing logic (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). The effects of utterances that result from the language-related sedimented belief systems of some interlocutors are an integral aspect of migrants’ everyday embodied experiences. They can have, to varying degrees, a real impact on migrants’ well-being and hinder their desire for complete social self-realisation (Honneth, 1995). Being resilient is, probably too often, a taken-for-granted attribute for individuals who venture to immerse themselves in the relational field of politics, even more so for migrants. Agentive responses to disturbances and adverse conditions require, in many cases, exceptional acts of willpower, investment, determination and resourcefulness (Bourbeau & Ryan, 2018). These skills may not be available to every political agent and, from a normative perspective, should not be anticipated from them (Erdocia, 2023). In short, the narratives of Maria and Yuna indicate that exercising resilience carries emotional discomfort. This study provides preliminary

insights into the embodied impact resulting from resilient reactions to language-related vulnerability, but there is still a need for a deeper understanding of how language and affective dimensions mediate vulnerability, invulnerability and social action (Pritzker, 2020, p. 250; Drożdżowicz & Peled, 2024).

Let me now discuss the significance of the empirical findings in the context of sociolinguistic scholarship on agency and power in intercultural communication in translocal spaces. Municipal politics in Ireland seems to still be a stratified space in which different Englishes index different recognition statuses (Tupas & Rubdy, 2015). Despite this, migrants find a way, albeit not without struggle, to enact agentic strategies – successful or not – to access and position themselves in the field. Such responsive practices might produce new orders of indexicality and, more broadly, attitudinal changes in dominant communities and institutions (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 222). We have seen examples of how the political space is sometimes reconstructed by interactions and negotiations between candidates and constituents. It follows that, against predominantly static accounts of mobility and status in socially and linguistically stratified domains, outsiders have the capacity to reconfigure (but not disrupt) restrictive social domains. This, at least partially, supports the view that politics is a permeable, open-ended, and dynamic space (Canagarajah, 2013).

Indeed, framing language-related prejudice in the dynamics between vulnerability and resilience has the advantage of capturing the complexity of social phenomena and the often-conflicted subject position of political actors when they are exposed to challenging environments. However, this study also points in a different direction. The findings can be interpreted as a cautionary note against over-optimistic accounts of resilience and, more generally, the transformative power of individual agency (Erdocia et al., 2024), particularly in hierarchically ordered spaces with external systemic imperatives, dependencies and expectations. Admittedly, as seen in some examples above, the attitudes of some individuals towards migrant candidates can evolve over time through the resilient actions of the candidates themselves. Thus, I am not suggesting a static account of political mobility in which ‘migrants do not enjoy agency in relation to existing language norms and indexical orders’ (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 206). Yet, structure-oriented constructs such as ideologies of language are organically tied to belief systems of national identity and culture and can significantly constrain the agentic capacities, including the negotiation strategies, of social actors (Blommaert, 2010). Additionally, particular contextual and ideological conditions can exacerbate the vulnerability of large segments of the population (Mills, 2015). This is evident in the growing number of cities, regions, and countries across Western democracies where far-right forces are gaining strength and institutional power. In our particular context, one characterised by asymmetrical ordered relations, ideologies seem to be relatively stable structures that determine which ways of speaking are legitimised and recognised as valid for political representation (Erdocia, 2025) and sometimes run counter to individuals’ actions and goals (Block, 2013, p. 142).

Considering the potential implications of this study in other contexts, I conclude by arguing that a disproportionate scholarly preoccupation with individuated resilience, micro-resistances or similar agency-oriented concepts may inadvertently divert our research away from scrutinising situated power differentials generated by broader systemic structures. Examining the connection between minor communicative events and macro patterns in society is crucial because the generative mechanisms underlying those structures are responsible for reproducing unbalanced outcomes of particular kinds of social and political activity (O’Regan, 2021). From a more applied research perspective, a narrow orientation may prevent us from exploring institutional strategies, for example, to ameliorate the conditions of people exposed to unequal treatment based on language or identity affiliation. As Blommaert reminds us (2005, p. 99), it is the interplay of action and determination that accounts for the social and political in communicative events.

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